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NSC FOR ABRAMS/YERGER/MCDERMOTT/RAMCHAND

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/07/2018

TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL PTER UNSC MARR MOPS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: NEA DAS HALE INFORMS SINIORA "NO CHANGE  
IN U.S. SYRIA POLICY"

Classified By: Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1  
.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) On October 7, NEA DAS Hale met with PM Siniora to brief him on recent U.S. discussions with Syria and reiterated that U.S. policy has not changed. PM Siniora believes that Syria continues to "pressure" the government of Lebanon (GOL) and has deployed troops along the northern border to intimidate local residents and magnify tensions on the ground. "(The Syrians) are creating the image of a 'monster' and will then claim they are the only ones who can tame it," he said.

¶2. (C) In terms of the Joint Military Commission (JMC) meeting on October 6, Siniora was pleased that it had been productive and he hopes it will contribute to a solid and committed USG relationship with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). End Summary.

¶3. (C) On October 7, NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hale, Ambassador, Pol/Econ Chief and Special Assistant met with Prime Minister Siniora and his advisor, Rola Noureddine, at the Grand Serail. Siniora, who was looking tan and relaxed after a recent family holiday in Turkey, said he had spoken by phone with Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan during the visit. He had no additional insight to share from the Turks on Israeli-Syrians talks, but said he and Erdogan had agreed to further discussions, perhaps during an official visit to Turkey this autumn.

"There has been no change in U.S. ) Syrian Policy"

¶4. (C) DAS Hale outlined the recent developments in U.S.-Syrian discussions. Hale stressed that the recent minor regional improvements by the Syrian regime are seen as merely a "beginning" by Washington and that the direct talks gave USG officials an opportunity to clearly outline how much further Syria would need to progress in order to be accepted by the international community. "There was no deal made and there has been no change in U.S. policy," Hale assured Siniora. "We viewed these talks as leverage and a means to communicate our continued concerns directly." Hale also stated that no additional high-level talks with Syria have been scheduled at this time.

¶5. (C) Siniora restated his concerns about continued Syrian influence in Lebanon and said the regime's goal is to place continued pressure on the GOL. He also cautioned that the Syrians are well-known for their political gamesmanship. "They are convinced that time is on their side and they are

willing to wait for things to change, including the U.S. administration." He said the short-term future will be critical, as Lebanon enters into its parliamentary election period and Syrian-Israeli and Syrian-Iranian talks continue. Syrian Troops Are On the Border to Intimidate, Not Invade

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¶ 16. (C) PM Siniora shared with us his assessment of recent Syrian military maneuvers. "Nobody thinks the Syrians have mobilized troops along the border for actual deployment into Lebanon. The Syrians aren't that stupid. They know that the move would be unacceptable to the international community, particularly in the Muslim world. However, they have said they are there to stop smuggling ) but Syrians typically aid the smugglers. They've said they are afraid of extremists entering into Syria from Lebanon ) but the reverse has historically been true, especially with those terrorists who were involved in the Nahr al-Barid conflict."

¶ 17. (C) Although not concerned about a Syrian invasion, Siniora was skeptical about Syrian intentions. "What Syria is really trying to do is to intimidate the population in the north and magnify the admittedly real problems we have in the area with conservative fundamentalists. The Syrians are masters at highlighting a problem that ) it turns out ) only they can solve (by taking on a police function). However, I have spoken with civil society groups in the north and even invited the Salafists to come meet with me. They all support the GOL and have no intention of allowing their region to become another 'Kandahar' or base for fundamentalists ) despite what the Syrians are implying." DAS Hale Outlines Israeli Concerns with Ghajar Withdrawal Proposals

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¶ 18. (C) DAS Hale also briefed Siniora on the recent discussions in Israel led by NEA PDAS Feltman. According to Hale, the USG's goal for these talks was to develop common strategic thinking about Lebanon. Siniora said that he has been concerned by a recent rise in anti-Lebanese rhetoric in Israel. DAS Hale responded that the U.S. has encouraged the GOI to consider ways to generate a more positive climate, but he said the unimpeded flow of weapons to Hizballah was a major concern for us and the Israelis.

¶ 19. (C) Siniora, ever the financial strategist, said that the whole problem could be solved with money. "We just need about ten million dollars to build some new homes and get the Israeli inhabitants out of Ghajar." (Note: He then mused aloud that, with recent "helpful" drops in the price of steel and concrete, the actual figure would be more like 5 ) 7 million USD. A bargain! End Note.) "It costs UNIFIL and the Israelis more, in the end, to conduct patrols and try to prevent narcotics smuggling in the area than it would for them to just build the houses."

¶ 10. (C) "We've had 18 months of talks on this issue and it is important to get the Israelis out now," said Siniora. He accepted the idea of UNIFIL as an interim security presence and said that the LAF would certainly plan to control the area UNIFIL departed, but this is something the GOL will negotiate with UNIFIL and "definitely not with Israel." Siniora also stressed the need to manage a withdrawal correctly, in a way that gave credit to the GOL and not Hizballah.

¶ 11. (C) When DAS Hale asked if Siniora was willing to consider other options to resolve the issue, Siniora merely shrugged and said the problem would only continue to grow if not resolved quickly. DAS Hale and the Ambassador mentioned that UN Special Coordinator Michael Williams would likely arrive in Beirut shortly with additional ideas for progress on the issue.

"JMC Talks Indicate USG Commitment to the LAF"

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¶ 12. (C) DAS Hale informed Siniora that the JMC meetings had been productive and that he had been impressed by the well-prepared and ambitious plans presented by the LAF. Hale said that further technical analysis was required on a few of the requests, including helicopters, but that these delays

did not represent policy differences. He underlined that the JMC should be viewed as a solid demonstration of the USG's support for the LAF.

¶13. (C) Siniora replied that he hoped the JMC would produce a new tone in the cooperative relationship. "We have had to struggle at times for assistance, including during the Nahr al-Barid fight when we needed ammunition," said Siniora. Both DAS Hale and the Ambassador stressed the U.S. commitment, at all levels of the Administration, to the cooperative relationship.

#### Regional Issues

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¶14. (C) Siniora asked for an update on the USG discussions with Iraqi PM Malaki and confirmed that he had also heard that talks are progressing. Siniora told us that after his recent visit to Baghdad, he reached out to counterparts in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Kuwait to stress the importance of Arab support for Iraq. Siniora also said that he would shortly be traveling back to Iraq to discuss energy, among other issues.

¶15. (C) Siniora ended the meeting by stressing the importance of the Middle East Peace Process, calling it the primary foreign policy concern in Muslim states, including even Turkey and Indonesia. Siniora also said that the current economic crisis in the U.S. will encourage an increase in radicalization, particularly if the effects are felt internationally.

¶16. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.

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